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RETENTION IN SALEM

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

(TITLE)

BY

Charles M. Raglin

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THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Specialist in Education

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1979

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
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December 10, 1979
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December 10, 1979
DATE

A Study of the
Practice of Retention
in Salem Elementary Schools

By

Charles Marcus Raglin
M.S. in Educ. Adm., SIU-Carbondale - 1963

Abstract of a Field Study
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Specialist Degree in Educational Administration
at the Graduate School of Eastern Illinois University
Charleston, Illinois

1979

Social or chronological promotion has long been a practice of the public schools of the United States. The alternative, nonpromotion or retention, has in the opinion of most psychologists and sociologists led to emotional and sociological trauma for the child. Another and probably the most cogent objection, is many parents oppose nonpromotion and are unwilling to accept the social stigma of "flunking." Children's achievement is a status symbol which profoundly affects families in many communities.

The writer contends that unless parents are directly involved in the decision early in the nonpromotion year, retention will not culminate in satisfactory achievement. Cooperation between the home and school is absolutely necessary to the success of this endeavor. A negative attitude, on the part of parents, will almost certainly lead to failure.

Another germane problem, involving student success, is the semantics of failure. Parenthetically, in far the majority of instances, it is not failure which poses the problem but inability to learn at the average levels of

expectation. If we recognize that children grasp their bottles, crawl, walk, climb, babble and speak at different ages, why do we not likewise accept the logical conclusion that each child will also grasp varied information in the learning process at different ages?

Salem Elementary Schools have practiced retention for the last few years. In the fall of 1977, twenty-three first graders were, with parent approval, retained in grade 1. SRA achievement tests were administered to these students in the spring of 1977, 1978 and 1979. These results will be examined to ascertain results of this practice.

The above report, together with questionnaires sent to parents and teacher evaluation (students presently in the third grade), will be studied to attempt verification of whether or not retention adversely effected the social, emotional and educational growth of these children.

Retention may become more prevalent and thereby less an anathema if competency testing becomes more salient. Results of this research may provide valuable information to this and other school systems as they attempt to fulfill the demand for accountability in public education.

Introduction

Salem Elementary Schools have been using nonpromotion or retention as a means whereby students in the first grade will be better prepared to cope with future educational pursuits. Approximately 10-12% of the students enrolled in grade one are affected by this practice. The rationale is that early retention will provide these pupils an opportunity to mature and students will then perform at the level of expectation.

Parent cooperation is an integral part of this policy. In fact, students are not retained unless parents concur. As early as possible, usually at the Fall parent-teacher conferences, parents are informed of student difficulties and the possibility of retention. In the Spring, a letter (See Appendix) is sent to parents asking them to attend a conference at which parents, teachers, and principal will discuss the options available.

Composite scores on the SRA Achievement Test Battery will be perused in an attempt to establish efficacy of retention on academic progress. Social and emotional impact on students as perceived by parents and teachers, will also be studied. A copy of this questionnaire can be found in the Appendix. The writer felt a study of this policy would make a worthy field study. Also, results will indicate whether or not retention actually fulfills the needs of these students.

Search of Literature

Probably one of the most controversial subjects in education today is promotion or nonpromotion. Although much of the research on this subject occurred prior to 1930, several surveys have been done in the last ten years relative to student retention.

Progressive or social promotion has almost become a universal practice in the public schools of the United States. Consequently, nonpromotion or retention has become almost an anathema in elementary and secondary education.

Literature, at least through the 1940's, was almost uniformly negative regarding nonpromotion or retention. The consensus of most educators was probably best exemplified by Goodlad's statement: "Early studies (1911-1941) of the effects of nonpromotion on achievement agree closely in their findings: children do not learn more by repeating a grade but experience less growth in subject-matter achievement than they do when promoted."

Further he stated: "In all these studies a number of non-promoted children did show reasonable growth in achievement during the repeated year. But, to offset this, a much larger percentage actually did worse on achievement tests after a year of repetition than they had done when

tested just before the impact of failure or the subsequent deadening effect of repetition, or both, destroyed the will to learn and impaired some of the learning that already had occurred."¹

Other contemporary advocates of progressive or social promotion cite research evidence from the mental health field, which indicates that retention has negative effects on the child's social acceptance, personality adjustment and attitude toward peers, teachers, and school in general. Too, learning is enhanced when children move on with their classmates into new endeavors, instead of experiencing the drill and boredom of repetition.²

Possibly the greatest opposition to retention comes from parents of the children involved. The social stigma attached to "flunking" is difficult for parents to accept. In many communities children's success in school is a status symbol.³

Despite the vast amount of negative evidence, positive effects of retention have been found. In 1952, Russell

¹John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson, The Nongraded Elementary School (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963, revised edition), pp. 34-35.

²Hal D. Funk, Illinois Schools Journal, Summer, 1969, p. 38.

³Betty A. Scott and Louise Bates Ames, "Improved Academic, Personal, and Social Adjustment in Selected Primary-School Repeaters," The Elementary School Journal, (May 1969), p. 432.

and others wrote: "Although ... pupils and the parents of pupils who have been retarded in a grade show more negative attitudes toward school than do pupils and their parents who have been regularly promoted, the differences are not great in most instances."⁴

One of the most positive studies on retention was done by Joan Ames Chase in the school year of 1966-67. This research involved children in grades 1-3 in the schools of Columbus, Ohio. Results showed that in this group of (65) immature children, those who were retained in the first grade were, after repeating the grade, in a far better position to compete with their classmates than were those who had been moved ahead to the second and third grades before being allowed to repeat.⁵

Another positive voice comes from Lorene A. Stringer. She states: "Retention can help a significant proportion of failing children if certain criteria for selection are followed." She also said, "Trying to develop a sound promotion program presents the difficult problem of trying to find a safe course between the rock of routine retentions

⁴David H. Russell, Roxie Alexander, Thomas A. Shellhammer and Faith Smitter, "The Influences of Repetition of a Grade and of Regular Promotion on the Attitudes of Parents and Children Toward Schools," California Journal of Elementary Education, Vol. 21 (August, 1952), p. 40.

⁵Joan Ames Chase, "A Study of the Impact of Grade Retention on Primary School Children," The Journal of Psychology, Vol. 70, (November, 1968), p. 176.

and the whirlpool of routine social promotions."⁶

Common practice today is to use average as the basis for categorizing student performance. As stated by Stahl and Anzalone, "Average pupil behavior is used as a yardstick of expectation to evaluate individuals. The average child might learn to read at age six but a perfectly normal individual might not develop sufficient skills for initial reading instruction until eight."⁷

This is carried further by Lewis who said, "It is difficult to understand and, indeed, sadly ironic that parents did not, in the past, rise up in arms against school authorities for adhering to the concept that at a given age all children can be expected to have the same capabilities and benefit from the same kind of instruction."⁸

Obviously the premise that all children, at a given age, or, in a given grade, learn at the same rate or in the same way in such varied fields as English, reading, mathematics, spelling or any other subject is as unrealistic as insisting they all wear the same size clothing or shoes.

⁶Lorene A. Stringer, "Report on a Retention Program," Review of Educational Research, 60 (April, 1960), p. 370.

⁷Donna K. Stahl and Patricia Anzalone, Individualized Teaching in Elementary Schools (West Nyack, N.Y.: Parker Publishing Co.), 1970, p. 19.

⁸James Lewis, Jr., A Contemporary Approach to Nongraded Education (West Nyack, N.Y.: Parker Publishing Co., 1969, p. 25.

Retention is not a panacea to all achievement problems children have. Some alternatives which would probably decrease the need for retention are available.

1. Postponement of student enrollment in kindergarten - Most of the students retained are found to be immature as compared to members of their peer group. In general, school board policy is to use December 1st as the cut off date to enroll. This date is satisfactory for 80-90% of the children. Schools need to encourage parents to defer enrolling students who are immature for their chronological age. A large percentage of this group are boys.
2. Nongraded schools - Establishing a primary school in which children would be unclassified as to grade placement would allow greater flexibility. For instance, students unable to finish in 3 years could attend for 4 years. Under this plan the stigma of retention would be minimized.

Subjects

Subjects involved in this study are presently enrolled in the third grade at Hawthorn School in Salem, Illinois. Of the original 23 pupils retained in the first grade, five have since moved out of the district. The range of STEA scores for these students ranged from 89 to 111. Therefore, all children were "basically normal but immature for the grade level." Fourteen of the students held back as first graders were boys.

In March of 1977, 1978 and 1979 SRA Achievement Tests were administered to these students. Analysis of these tests (composite scores), together with parent questionnaires and teacher evaluations, will be used in this research. This study is designed to test the following hypothesis: (1) Perceptual and motor skills (maturity) will occur during this year of retention (first grade) and, ergo, greater academic achievement will be made by the student in ensuing years. (2) Repeating, especially in the first grade, will not adversely affect the child's social and emotional development.

Materials

The 1972 edition of the SRA Achievement Tests were given in the Spring of 1977 and 1978. In the Spring of 1979,

the 1978 edition was administered. Composite scores from these tests will be compared in an attempt to try to ascertain if nonpromotion affected student achievement.

Two questionnaires (See Appendix) were designed for use by parents and teachers in evaluating social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment after retention. Fifteen of nineteen parent questionnaires were returned while teacher response was 100%.

Results

SRA Achievement Tests showed the following composite scores:

Table I

	Percentiles				
	0-10	11-22	23-49	50-75	75-85
As 1st graders*	9	5	7		
Repeaters	1	1	7	12	2
As 2nd graders**	6	1	7	3	1

* Two students failed to complete the test.

** Five students had moved out of the district.

When tested as first graders, all of the achievement scores ranged in the 0-49th percentile. As repeaters, the mean was askewed to the right as a majority of the students (21) scored in the 23rd to 85th percentile. Although a majority of the pupils (11) scored in the 23rd to 85th percentile as second graders, the number in the 0-10th category increased

significantly. Perhaps the change to the 1978 edition of the test had some effect on the results.

Fifteen parent questionnaires were returned in this survey. This represents a 78% response. Parent responses indicated that retained students showed little, if any, social or emotional trauma. Table 2 shows results of this study.

Table 2

	Yes	No
Retention was beneficial	14	1
Good school attitude	13	2
Repetition led to better grades the following year	14	1

Parent responses showed considerable support for retention. A great majority felt that nonpromotion had been beneficial for their child.

Teacher evaluation, regarding social and emotional adjustment, indicate no trauma at this stage in the students' educational program. All nineteen of these pupils seem to exhibit no hostility toward school. They were functioning normally with their peers in all aspects of the school environment. The statement "You flunked first grade" seems to have fallen into the 'passe' category.

Summary

Conclusive evidence that nonpromotion or retention was academically beneficial to this group of first graders did not evolve from this study. Significant progress resulted when these children were tested the repeating year, but when administered to them as second graders, SRA Achievement Test results were not decisive. Test outcomes in the Spring of 1980 (students will be in third grade) should give more germane information.

The question then arises, if these children had not been retained, what would their performance be had they been progressively promoted? Pragmatically, this becomes an unanswerable question. There were only the two options - promote or retain. Like the old adage, "You cannot have your cake and eat it, too," it is impossible to do both. Actually, five of the nineteen subjects are presently performing at grade level or above in their reading group. This substantiates a previous statement in this paper; "probably one of the most controversial subjects in education today is promotion or nonpromotion."

Definitely this study refutes the findings reported by Sandin. "Repeaters, generally speaking, did not receive

the social approval or acceptance of the regularly promoted.⁹

Parents and teachers of these retained students gave no indication of social or emotional problems. Actually, they reported no trauma regarding student hostility or peer acceptance.

Therefore, retention is a plausible practice as followed in the Salem Elementary Schools. The following steps are essential to success:

1. Retain early in school life.
2. Keep parents fully informed regarding student progress - this must be a year long process.
3. Secure parent approval and cooperation before retaining.

Adolph Sandin, Social and Emotional Adjustments of Regularly Promoted and Nonpromoted Pupils, Child Monographs, No. 32 (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1944), p. 38.

Appendix

SALEM ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

GALEN L. BRANT, SUPERINTENDENT

315 SOUTH MAPLE

SALEM, ILLINOIS 62881

March 28, 1979

Mr. and Mrs. John Doe
1310 South Main
Salem, Illinois 62881

Dear Mr. and Mrs. John Doe:

You have been contacted regarding Jeana's school progress. It is felt she might benefit by remaining in grade one for next year. Spending another year in the first grade would give Jeana a chance to achieve a better academic foundation and more mature attitudes and behavior.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Baldridge
Miss Borsenberger
Mrs. DuBois
Galen Brant, Principal
Hawthorn Grade School

* * * * *

Please sign and return this slip to Hawthorn School

- ☐ You have my permission to enroll Jeana for another year in grade one.
- ☐ I would like Jeana to be placed in second grade next year.

Parent's Signature

Parent Questionnaire

Dear Parents:

Would you please take a few minutes of your time to fill out the enclosed questionnaire? Signatures are not necessary, but you may sign if you wish.

We hope to gain information regarding student retention as a result of this study.

STUDENT RETENTION

- | | | |
|-----|----|--|
| Yes | No | 1. Do you feel the decision to retain has been beneficial to your child? |
| Yes | No | 2. Do you feel your child has a good attitude concerning school? |
| Yes | No | 3. After spending a second year in the same grade, do you feel your child did better the following year? |
4. Your thoughts regarding retention will be very helpful to us. We value your frank opinion. Please use this space to make any comment about your personal experience with retention.

Teacher Questionnaire

Dear Teacher:

As you know, several children of your class were retained in the first grade. We are interested in finding out if this practice affected the child emotionally or socially. Please respond to the following statements.

- | | | |
|-----|----|---|
| Yes | No | 1. Students retained exhibit hostility toward classmates and school in general. |
| Yes | No | 2. Peer group seems to have completely accepted nonpromoted students. |
| Yes | No | 3. Social or emotional trauma is quite evident because of the stigma of "flunking." |

Please make any comments you feel might be relevant regarding these students.

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